

## Lifelong learning

The concept of 'lifelong learning' is closely related to the widening participation debate. Lifelong learning is about adults taking responsibility for engaging in learning that serves to develop their social, cultural and professional awareness. The issue with regard to widening participation is that adults have particular difficulties with taking part in learning due to the pressures of work, family and social life. Many of the strategies discussed above are relevant to ensuring that adults achieve their learning goals. Financial constraints need to be addressed; distance and e-learning approaches together with sensitive timetabling are needed; effective advice and guidance is required in addition to comprehensive support packages; modular approaches and credit-transfer can be particularly beneficial. See Stock (1996) for a review of issues relevant to lifelong learning.

The stimulus for lifelong learning has not been solely for the benefit of the individual. The climate is one of a competitive global learning economy in which continuing personal and professional development is critical to maintaining a competitive advantage. The result has been a shift in priorities from learning in community-based settings for recreational purposes (see Chapter 1 for a discussion of 'liberal education' and the role of organisations such as the Workers' Educational Association and university extension programmes) to work-related training for professional development purposes. The era of growth of adult education in the first half of the twentieth century will be remembered by many as a period of personal enrichment; the idea that one was learning for learning's sake, rather than for economic gain. The system was largely organised on a local basis and funded through the LEA. The advantage was that a response could be made to local need, but the result was inequalities across the country in terms of levels of funding according to LEA priorities.

The curriculum tended to be determined by demand and the expertise of individual tutors. The *ad hoc* nature of the system was also seen in the 'amateur' status of tutors, who rarely had any formal training. Nevertheless, the system proved inspirational to many and was the envy of European neighbours. The 1970s saw a professionalisation of the adult education system, with the Venables Report (1976) emphasising the importance of continuing vocational education. Adult education initiatives started to focus on the development of skills, including basic skills (with voluntary adult literacy schemes, for example) and latterly IT skills have featured among the most popular courses. IT is interesting because there is a polarity between the motivation for taking the subject, with some learners doing it out of general interest and some for professional development. With changing career patterns and 'portfolio' careers involving several part-time jobs, the idea of 'recurrent education', that one would return to learning as and when required by one's career, became appealing (Van der Zee 1996).